

ON THE HORIZON

HENRY ADAMS' SKEPTIC FAITH IN DEMOCRACY

What If It Should Succeed . . . !

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HENRY ADAMS, who made a philosophy and a career out of his self-publicized failure, was descended from the most illustrious family of "failures" America has ever produced. His great-grandfather, John Adams, the first vice-president and the second president of the United States, spent his life bitterly lamenting the failure of his principles, his party, and his popularity. His grandfather, John Quincy Adams, succeeded, in his turn, to the presidency, but shared with John Adams the mortification of not being reelected for a second term, as he also shared with him an introspective, self-critical, and moralistic cast

SCION of the presidential Founding Fathers, Henry Adams himself had grave doubts about the future of democracy as he observed its operations in the America of his time, and he expressed his forebodings in one of the most influential of American autobiographies, *The Education of Henry Adams*, published after his death in 1918. Earlier, Adams had set forth his view of the American political system in a novel, *Democracy*, first published anonymously in 1880 and recently republished (Farrar, Straus, and Young, 246 pp., \$3.50). GERTRUDE HIMMELFARB here discusses the subtleties and contradictions of Adams's thinking as they are revealed in this curious work of fiction. Miss Himmelfarb, a frequent contributor to COMMENTARY, is the editor of *Essays on Freedom and Power*, a selection from the work of Lord Acton, the 19th-century English historian, and the author of *Lord Acton: A Study in Conscience and Politics*, which was recently published by the University of Chicago Press. She studied at Brooklyn College, the University of Chicago, where she earned her doctorate in history, and Cambridge University.

of mind. Henry's father, Charles Francis Adams, had the important diplomatic position of minister to Great Britain, but at the unfortunate time of the American Civil War, when British high society and officialdom were overwhelmingly partial to the South, and when intrigue seemed to prevail over principle. Henry Adams could thus boast a long and respectable education in failure.

The failure, however, was not so much one of men, as of men in time. The Adamses, Henry noted in his *Education*, were children of the 17th and 18th centuries who unexpectedly found themselves in a 19th century that was prematurely taking on the color of the 20th. They were of the 17th century in the Cromwellian moral universe which they inhabited, a universe of permanent moral revolution: "Resistance to something was the law of New England nature; the boy [Henry Adams] looked out on the world with the instinct of resistance; for numberless generations his predecessors had viewed the world chiefly as a thing to be reformed, filled with evil forces to be abolished, and they saw no reason to suppose that they had wholly succeeded in the abolition; the duty was unchanged." And they were men of the 18th century in the aristocratic political system which they aspired to govern, a system aristocratic not by virtue of some blind, mechanical principle of patrimony—such was the England of the 18th century, which the Americans had repudiated by the desperate measure of revolution—but by that natural instinct which supposedly induced society to surrender itself to the care of its betters. The rapid decline in the political fortunes of the Adamses,

which relegated Charles Francis to the ministry at London and made of Henry a journalist hanger-on in Washington and a professor at Harvard, was a measure of the completeness with which America had discarded its colonial traditions.

THE novel *Democracy*, published in 1880, was a description of a ruling class with the Adamses left out. It appeared anonymously, created something of a sensation after its publication in England, and while it was variously attributed to Henry Adams's wife and his best friends, almost no one seriously proposed Adams himself as its author (with the one exception of Mrs. Humphry Ward, who was soon afterwards to bring out the literary sensation of the decade in England, and who guessed Adams's authorship on the basis of slight personal acquaintance and the memory of an article of his on "Civil Service Reform," printed thirteen years earlier). Not until 1921, three years after Adams's death, was the truth of its authorship definitely revealed, although long before then, with the appearance of his *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* and the private circulation of his *Education*, some thoughtful men must have penetrated the secret.

The heroine of *Democracy* is an intelligent, sensitive, earnest, and sharp-witted woman who performs the same role in the novel as Adams does in the *Education*, the role of the seeker after truth, the pursuer of an education. A young, attractive, and wealthy widow, who can be moved by neither the passion of love nor the greed of money, Mrs. Madeleine Lee decides that in Washington politics she might find the meaning of contemporary life. "She wanted to see with her own eyes the action of primary forces; to touch with her own hand the massive machinery of society; to measure with her own mind the capacity of the motive power. She was bent upon getting to the heart of the great American mystery of democracy and government."

She not only gets to the heart of the mystery, but she very nearly captures it—or is captured by it—in the person of the Honorable Silas P. Ratcliffe, Senator from Illinois, known to his best friends and worst enemies as "the Prairie Giant of Peonia." Ratcliffe is

the archetype of the Senator, for whom power is the whole of politics and politics the whole of life. (In the *Education*, it was enough in the way of characterization for Adams to say of one man that "he loved power as though he were still a Senator.") The Senator, particularly the ideal type from the "West" who represents the new and rootless man, is both clever and uncouth. Ratcliffe makes his first appearance at a fashionable dinner wearing gloves, he is ignorant of French, and his courtship of Mrs. Lee has nothing of the Old World delicacy of his ineffectual rival, the Southern gentleman, Mr. Carrington. Yet he almost succeeds in winning Mrs. Lee, as he has already won over his main political enemy, the President, by masterful intrigue and an unscrupulous manipulation of power. He is defeated, as it happens, by the bungling efforts of Mrs. Lee's naive sister and by a last-minute violation of a confidence on the part of Mr. Carrington (who fastidiously makes the exposure by letter rather than in person); but there is no one to frustrate his political designs because there is no more consummate an intriguer than he.

PUT baldly in this way, the story is reminiscent of the innocent maiden rescued by the fair-haired hero from the clutches of the dastardly villain. Except for the faintest skeletal resemblance of plot, however, there is nothing else in the novel to suggest the melodrama. In flesh, indeed, it is more closely akin to some of the novels of Adams's good friend Henry James, as the perspicacious Mrs. Ward suggested. It has some of James's brilliant writing—the early James—as in a passage describing Ratcliffe's reaction to the deliberate flattery of Mrs. Lee: "The Senator from Illinois rose to this gaudy fly like a huge, two-hundred-pound salmon; his white waistcoat gave out a mild silver reflection as he slowly came to the surface and gorged the hook. He made not even a plunge, not one perceptible effort to tear out the barbed weapon, but floating gently to her feet, allowed himself to be landed as though it were a pleasure."

It also has the Jamesian instinct for irony and ambiguity, applied, however, not so much to personal relations as to the play of mind. When a Congressman from Connecticut virtuously parades his championship of Civil Service Reform (a cause to which

both Mrs. Lee and Henry Adams were committed), Ratcliffe gets the better of the exchange with the retort: "Every child in the Union knows that the most famous products of Connecticut are Yankee notions, nutmegs made of wood, and clocks that won't go. Now, your Civil Service Reform is just such another Yankee notion; it's a wooden nutmeg; it's a clock with a show case and sham works. . . . You have gone about peddling your wooden nutmegs until you have got yourself into Congress, and now you pull them out of your pockets and not only want us to take them at your own price, but you lecture us on our sins if we don't. Well! we don't mind your doing that at home. Abuse us as much as you like to your constituents. Get as many votes as you can. But don't electioneer here, because we know you intimately, and we've all been a little in the wooden nutmeg business ourselves."

ABOVE all, it has that typical characteristic of James's novels: a complicated, even tortuous moral dilemma which must somehow be resolved in terms of the clear and certain principles of morality. That Ratcliffe's political behavior, like corruption in general, is immoral there is no doubt; but of the methods, motives, and even the principles of the reformers there is considerable doubt. When Mrs. Lee considers marrying Ratcliffe, it is not out of stupidity, gullibility, or even weakness, but precisely out of intelligence, cunning, and strength, to say nothing of excellent intentions. She can find no worthier object to which to dedicate herself than the reform of government, and if this means an association with the most powerful public figure of the time, it is surely her duty to enter into such an association. Ratcliffe appeals to her for advice. Can she refrain from giving it? If it is his responsibility to act in the best public interest, is it not hers to counsel him as to that best interest? And if, as Ratcliffe persuasively argues, he is to act in the best interest, does he not have to contrive to remain in power, and so does not Mrs. Lee have to advise him in that regard too? "What woman of thirty, with aspirations for the infinite, could resist an attack like this? . . . What was there in her aimless and useless life which made it so precious that she could not afford to fling it into the gutter, if need be, on the bare

chance of enriching some fuller existence?"

When Mrs. Lee finally decides to reject Ratcliffe's offer of marriage, it is, as he is quick to point out, for reasons that are not entirely logical. In the last interview between the two, she confronts him with Carrington's letter accusing him of having taken a bribe to alter his vote. Ratcliffe admits the basic charge, but insists that nothing has changed between them. He had taken the bribe as a contribution to the campaign expenses of his party, and it was as important for his party to win the election as it had been to win the recent Civil War. "There are conflicting duties in all the transactions of life, except the simplest," he tells Mrs. Lee, adding, perhaps in sly reference to Carrington's own violation of a solemn promise: "However we may act, do what we may, we must violate some moral obligation." He reminds her that he himself had never pretended to conform to principles of "abstract morality." Indeed he had once confessed to a far more serious transgression, which Mrs. Lee had then seemed to condone. During the election of 1864, in the worst days of the war, it had seemed as if the opposing party, the pro-slavery "peace" party, would carry Illinois and with it the Union. As governor of the state, Ratcliffe had then taken it upon himself to change the election returns of certain counties so that his party would capture the state. The desperate expedient, he argues, was appropriate to the desperate situation. If Mrs. Lee did not see fit to break off their relationship in protest against an act that subverted the very principle of democracy, why should she now be horrified at the tale of a commonplace bribery?

The audacity of the man astonishes Mrs. Lee. "Was it politics," she wonders, "that had caused this atrophy of the moral senses by disuse?" Was the man a moral lunatic, ignorant of the difference between good and evil? She does not pretend to argue with him; she suspects he would be her superior in argument. She can only say that she will not marry him even to reform him because she has learned the absurdity of her trying to reform anyone or anything, least of all in politics. She will not share the profits of vice or be put in the position of having perpetually to defend immorality as a virtue.

The dramatic requirements of the novel form—or what Adams took to be those re-

quirements—may give a deceptively optimistic color to the end of the novel. Ratcliffe is exposed as evil, and Mrs. Lee's virtue, both personal and political, is preserved. In fact, however, it is the evidence of Adams's ironic sensibility that Ratcliffe's argument is unanswered, that Mrs. Lee, in womanly fashion, can only oppose instinct to reason (moral instinct to immoral reason), and that intellectually she retires in defeat. And the intellectual defeat is also a political one, for she leaves Washington forever, convinced that reform is as vain as politics is sordid. Mrs. Lee, like Henry Adams, has been subjected to an education in failure.

WITH the conclusions of a radical pessimism of this sort, it is difficult to argue. What importance one assigns to these conclusions is decided less by logic or history than by personal temperament. That neither the rigors of abstract morality nor the delicacies of private morality can be the arbiters of politics is a truism that never fails to come as a shock to sensitive men of every generation. To some men, however, it comes in adolescence, as a primitive fact of life to which experience and familiarity will make them insensible; while to others, of the Henry Adams variety, it comes as the lesson of maturity, the end of an education, and remains as a permanently exposed raw nerve to be set vibrating by the least contact with society.

If this proposition about morality and politics were all that was implied in *Democracy*, the novel would properly be judged not by reference to the truth of the proposition, which is evident, but to the passion with which it is presented, its dramatic urgency and emotional subtlety. In fact, however, there is a further proposition, distinctly stated although not systematically argued, which is questionable, both as to truth and meaning. This is the proposition implied in the title, that not politics as such, but rather the politics of democracy, is the source of corruption, and that the basic antithesis is not morality against politics but morality against democracy.

"I must know," Mrs. Lee announces, "whether America is right or wrong. Just now this question is a very practical one, for I really want to know whether to believe in Mr. Ratcliffe. If I throw him overboard,

everything must go, for he is only a specimen"—a specimen, she soon makes clear, of universal suffrage and democracy, and thus of corruption. Just what there is in democracy that makes it so fatally attractive to corruption is not specified. In fact, as it turns out, Ratcliffe's greatest political crime, his initiation into crime on a grand scale and perhaps even his original fall from grace, was his violation of the principle of democracy itself when he tampered with the election returns. It can be argued that this was hardly the act of a man blindly obedient to the will of the people, whose vice was the democratic one of submitting to an ignorant, bigoted, and selfish populace. It was, indeed, the act of a man as contemptuous of his constituency as the most arbitrary English Tory.

The logical and ideological point of *Democracy* is vitiated by this failure to locate the source of moral perversion. There is no satisfactory explanation of what makes Ratcliffe, regarded as a specimen of democracy, corrupt, and Carrington, a specimen of the Southern aristocracy (and thus a defender of slavery), virtuous. The defect is particularly surprising because Adams had an uncommonly rigorous notion of what constituted an explanation, and was generally disposed to a determinism of the most mechanical variety. Indeed, in the *Education* he does offer a deterministic explanation of just such phenomena as Ratcliffe and Carrington. The explanation there is in terms not of the development of democracy but of the development of engineering. The generation which came in the wake of the Civil War was "mortgaged to the railways," and required energies and talents which the Adamses obviously lacked: "They could scarcely have earned five dollars a day in any modern industry." In such a society, power alone was real. And power, Adams was convinced, "is poison." Even on a Theodore Roosevelt, whom he judged to be of "a singularly direct nature and honest intent," power had an intoxicating, almost insane, effect. This, Adams blandly noted, was "the effect of unlimited power on limited mind." It was unfortunate, but it was perhaps unavoidable, that a society driven by the railways should be possessed of such unlimited resources of power and such limited resources of mind.

IN ANY case, it is clear that the sober Adams, when undistracted by the dramatic confusions of the novel, did not hold democracy itself at fault. He could not always abstain from witticism: "Democracy, rightly understood, is the government of the people, by the people, for the benefit of Senators." But even in this novel, he clearly aligns himself with the forces of democracy—not a democracy that represents as the inevitable future of man the triumph of barbarism, but one that represents the only future that might conceivably mean the triumph of civilization.

One of the characters in *Democracy*, Mr. Nathan Gore, a successful historian and not so successful diplomat, gives it as his confession of faith: "I believe in democracy. I accept it. I will faithfully serve and defend it. I believe in it because it appears to me the inevitable consequence of what has gone before it. Democracy asserts the fact that the masses are now raised to higher intelligence than formerly. All our civilization aims at this mark. We want to do what we can to help it. I myself want to see the result. I grant it is an experiment, but it is the only direction society can take that is worth its taking; the only conception of its duty large enough to satisfy its instincts; the only result that is worth an effort or a risk. Every other possible step is backward, and I do not care to repeat the past." Pressed further, Mr. Gore, who parades as a cynic (he swears his audience to secrecy on the grounds that he would lose his character at home if such sentiments got out), professes to subscribe to the new democratic dogmas: faith in human nature, faith in science, and faith in the survival of the fittest. "Let us be true to our time," he urges. "If our age is to be beaten, let us die in the ranks. If it is to be victorious, let us be first to lead the column. Anyway, let us not be skulkers or grumblers."

Even this confession of faith is not with-

out its share of irony. The fact was that neither Adams nor his spokesman, Mr. Gore, had much confidence in human nature, science, or the survival of the fittest. And surely Adams was the most persistent "skulker and grumbler" in all of American history. His support of democracy was based, in reality, not on a conviction of the truth of its dogmas, but on the belief that if, by some chance, they should prove to be true, they would be the most important and wonderful truths ever to confront man. In his *History*, which Adams started to work on as soon as he finished his *Democracy*, he was more explicit:

If Americans were right in thinking that the next necessity of human progress was to lift the average man upon an intellectual and social level with the most favored, they stood at least three generations nearer than Europe to their common goal. The destinies of the United States were certainly staked, without reserve or escape, on the soundness of this doubtful and even improbable principle, ignoring or overthrowing the institutions of Church, aristocracy, family, army, and political intervention, which long experience had shown to be needed for the safety of society. Europe might be right in thinking that without such safeguards society must come to an end; but even Europeans must concede that there was a chance, if no greater than one in a thousand, that America might, at least for a time, succeed. If this stake of temporal and eternal welfare stood on the winning card; if man actually should become more virtuous and enlightened, by mere process of growth, without Church or paternal authority; if the average human being could accustom himself to reason with the logical process of Descartes and Newton!—what then?

Then, Adams seemed to be saying, it would all have been worth while—his own failure and the temporary dominance of the Ratcliffes. In any event, America, he was sure, was "the only country now worth working for."